DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 089 308 CS 201 111

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TITLE Legitimizing the Department's Bastard Child: The Basic Mythology Course.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (63rd, Philadelphia, November 22-24, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Classical Literature; Curriculum Development; *English Instruction; *English Programs; Fables; Folk Culture; Legends; *Literary Influences; Literature; *Mythology; Relevance (Education); Symbols (Literary); Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

Legitimizing the basic college mythology course depends in part on the teacher's preparedness and also on the course content and objectives. Both must derive from what the teacher can teach best, what he has sound knowledge of and can handle in an interesting way, coupled with what will best satisfy the needs of students and be of most use in their lives. The following questions should be considered before determining the content focus of a course: (1) Does the content permit preparation that narrows the range of the teacher's required knowledge or does it force the teacher to demonstrate expertise he does not have? (2) Does the content permit legitimate handling by an English teacher and allow for course objectives that are justified in a course offered by the English department? (3) Does the content promote a range of outcomes useful enough to students generally to make that content the best choice for the students' sake? and (4) Does the content meet the growing demand for the meaningful involvement of media and variety in the presentation of course substance as well as a useful variety of experiences for the student? (A description of the author's course is included.) (LL)

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# LEGITIMIZING THE DEPARTMENT'S BASTARD CHILD: THE BASIC MYTHOLOGY COURSE

(Prepared for Session C5, "Approaches to the College Teaching of Mythology," at the 1973 N.C.T.E. Convention in Philadelphia.)

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# LEGITIMIZING THE DEPARTMENT'S BASTARD CHILD: THE BASIC MYTHOLOGY COURSE

Among the bravest, if not wisest, of college-level English teachers should be included those few who teach basic mythology courses. Because the course draws so much of its substance from other disciplines and, usually, so little of it from those areas in which its teacher is specifically prepared to teach, the course is the English Department's bastard child, and those who teach it have always to be its legitimizers. I make no pretense at having all the answers to that legitimizing process, especially since what I do have to offer is drawn not from the current genius of academia, scientific research complete with statistics and measurements, but instead from personal experience. The answers I do have point directly to the teacher as legitimizer, to the teacher's willingness to cut from a large and varied fabric a course that <u>should</u> be included among the English Department's offerings as opposed to being there for lack of a place elsewhere in the catalog to list it.

The teacher of the basic mythology course, as I see him then, should be a special and courageous type whose learning lies not alone behind him but principally ahead. He must be a generalist whose love of many things assures curiosity, a jack of several trades who is willing to overcome what could be a tendency to settle for superficial knowledge, a devoted scholar in what is indeed a complicated and yet developing field. The

days of Gayley or Bulfinch in the class and Frazer in the teacher's mind are almost as far behind us as Ptolemy is behind today's astronomers. Every new dig made by archaeologists is the substance of a mythology teacher's latest learning, as are every applicable finding in languages, every study in group and individual behavior, every cross-cultural study in anthropology, every new bit of theorizing in theology, every new work that might relate in literature, music, film, and the visual arts. The fact is, to any but the totally devoted teacher of the basic mythology course the undertaking must seem insane--perhaps more ridiculous even than Mr. Casaubon's lifelong addiction to discovery of the "Key to all Mythologies" in George Eliot's Middlemarch.

What might well surprise you after that is that I don't mean that the teacher of the basic myth course should know all mythology. I hesitate to say it is impossible having encountered rather extensively the remarkable works of people like Sir James George Frazer, Robert Graves, and Joseph Campbell as I have, but it is surely unlikely and certainly unnecessary. My own most recent work in mythology has not been that broad, its focus classical mythology applied in the arts, with due emphasis given to whatever will enhance my knowledge of myth in general and of useful parallels. That somewhat restricted scope has been quite enough, in the past five years, to bring regularly into play the various areas of study mentioned and to lead me to and through well over forty new books of importance, articles in considerable number, new recordings, new films and television programs--all of this not to mention the array of general reading necessary just to find out what is new, there being no single source that caters

to the offbeat interests of teachers of mythology. I am not quite sure how I would have managed even that small corner of preparedness had it not been that mythology has been and continues to be my principal professional interest.

If legitimizing the basic mythology course then depends in part on the teacher's preparedness, it also depends on the course's content and objectives. Both must derive from what the teacher best can teach, what he has sound knowledge of and can handle in an interesting way, coupled with what will best satisfy the needs of students and be of most use in their lives. For me that coupling has come out myths of the Greeks and Romans. They form the focal myth content of the course I teach for the simple reason that I have never seen the point in having students learn the myths of, say, the Ifugaos when so many more benefits accrue to students who know generally the myths of the Greeks and Romans. It is true that exactly the same things can be learned about mythology through studying Ifugaoan mythology as can be learned through studying classical mythology, but there the alikeness ends. As something resembling proof, here is the stated objective of my basic mythology course: "The objective of 'Readings in Mythology' is to help the student understand the many ways myth is involved in everyday life today. This will be accomplished by familiarizing him with some of the great myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans and parallels of the myths elsewhere, by helping him understand the nature of myth and the suggested reasons for its existence, and by showing him some of the applications of myth in works of literature, art, music, and film, as well as in the signs, symbols, and language of our time." Not very much of that broad objective

and description would be possible with any other myth system, let alone Ifugaoan--unless, that is, we consider Christian or Hebrew mythology, something you're not likely to catch me doing where I teach, Utah State University.

Also, there's always the possibility mythology courses of the basic type could be taught without focus on a single myth system, but that would necessitate substitute focus on something like the nature of myth itself, which in my mind is hardly justifiable in an English Department course offering. Remember, I'm trying to legitimize the department's bastard child, not create one! It is not that I think Greek and Roman mythology the sole and proper province of an English teacher but that focus on it is one way of making possible his proper province, if not clearly as an English teacher, certainly as a teacher in the humanities and arts. That consideration simply has to be of importance in the legitimizing process.

In my own case, when I arrived at focus on myths of the Greeks and Romans for the basic mythology course, I in fact made possible a broad network of course outcomes. With that focus I am able to teach to that large objective ("to help the student understand the many ways myth is involved in everyday life today"), which for the most part could be taught to with any other focus, but I can do so while achieving many ends that could not be gotten to through any other focus. Of some significance, I am able to have the students read about one system alone while I enlarge their understanding of mythology generally through what I talk about in class and assign otherwise. Having gone a number of routes in past mythology courses I've taught, I'm well aware

that students in the course find organizing what they've read to be their hardest task. If there is some clear thematic focus, as in David Adams Leeming's Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero, published by Lippincott, they can organize. If there is clear focus on one myth system, as in Philip Mayerson's Classical Mythology in Literature, Art, and Music, published by Xerox, or even in texts like Hamilton's Mythology, Morford and Lenardon's Classical Mythology, and others, students can also organize. Other arrangements do not seem to work as well. Even though I have used texts that individually focus on creation myths, solar mythology, and the like, the expounding upon complicated theory by the authors and quick changes in the text from one myth system to another throw students. Perhaps worse, those types of texts force me as teacher into the position of either teaching through a course focus that would be more legitimately the province of the anthropologist or teaching from a too simple level of myth as story.

Focus on myths of the Greeks and Romans allows me the freedom to achieve concrete objectives that have to do with many disciplines, to be sure, but those objectives derive from my focus rather than are my focus. It is basically the difference between teaching a theory outside my discipline--for example, Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism--and bringing it into class as applicable in our study of a Greek and Roman myth. (The reverse of that might further demonstrate my point. The anthropologist can probably teach Robert Graves' novel Hercules, My Shipmate as anthropology, but it is not logically his role to teach it solely as literature. His focus is everything where in the halls of academe disciplinary

boundaries are traditionally established with more zeal than sense.) With a clear focus on myths of the Greeks and Romans in the basic mythology course, I am free to point out parallels between, say, the myth of Bellerophon and Pegasus and the biblical tower of Babel (with a certain degree of hesitancy in Utah, of course), and indeed parallels are an important part of the study of mythology. I can with that focus show students the applicability of terms like "animatism," "animism," personification," and "anthropomorphism"; can let the students come to grips with the problems of abstraction inherent in myth through the "it" and "thou" relationships that separate modern from primitive myth-making; can have them deal with archetypes and with dreams; can put them in contact with the factors that contribute to the content and shape, as well as the origin, of myths; can have them explore the varieties of types under the genus "myth"; can demonstrate for them that there are "formulae" that seem to apply to all heroes in all times and places; can make them understand the intricate relationships between belief, ritual, magic and worship; can, in short, prove to them that the question to ask of myth is not "Is it true?" but "What is it intended to do?" All of these and more I can do as an English teacher since a focus on the myths of the Greeks and Romans opens the possibility, as would a focus on any other myth system, whereas the reverse, focus on the terms and ways of understanding, would make questionable the existence of the course as an offering of the English Department.

Lest it seem that I've now deteriorated into a hocus-pocus routine in my legitimizing frenzy, let me quickly seek safety in the further benefits that derive from having specifically the

myths of the Greeks and Romans and not some other myth system, group of systems, or thematic grouping as content focus in the basic mythology course.

If it is generally true that myth does play an important role in our lives today, hence the workability of any of the possibilities just listed, it is moreso true that a knowledge of the myths of the Greeks and Romans will do a greater service for students inasmuch as those myths play a far greater role in their lives as individual myths than do the myths of any other system--again excluding as lay teachable, in the case of we Utahns at least, the Hebrew and Christian myths.

Can there be any doubt concerning the influence of the classical myths on our language, on the signs and symbols we see frequently employed, on the arts of the western world, and on our very ways of thinking and perceiving? That question alone makes it clear why a focus on the myths of the Greeks and Romans has been for me a major ingredient in the legitimizing process. It accounts for why part of my course's objective is described as showing the student "some of the applications of myth in works of literature, art, music, and film, as well as in the signs, symbols, and language of our time" and most definitely accounts for a significant expansion of the potential of the objective stated as "to help the student understand the many ways myth is involved in everyday life today." With classical mythology the focal content of the basic mythology course, it is not only possible to use interdisciplinary approaches as ways of understanding that content, it is quite possible to use the content to turn the course further toward meaningfulness and legitimacy as an

offering of the college-level English Department. What remains for me to explain, then, is how. I'll assume it should be fairly apparent how Greek and Roman mythology can be related to the language, signs, and symbols of our time and will go on to the "how" of "some of the applications of myths in works of literature, art, music, and film."

During the summer of 1972, I wrote an article entitled "An Arts-Centered Mythology Course" that has since appeared in Exercise Exchange.[1] In it I described an honors course called "Classical Mythology in Western Art" that I'd been teaching then for four years. At the time I wrote that article, my basic mythology course was itself becoming more and more arts oriented, but the machinery of bringing the arts in a smooth way into the course had me baffled. Unlike in the honors course, where whole operas could be listened to in class at a single sitting because the course had arranged timing, I couldn't very well do the same thing in a fifty-minute time period in the basic mythology course. I did have some excerpts from music on tape, a modest collection of slides, and had my students read some poems and even a novel. The whole thing was clumsy, however, and I didn't really like the lack of smooth integration.

Finally, by Spring Quarter this year, my collection of slides of Greek and Roman myths employed in painting and sculpture (classical and later), scenes of temples and monuments in Greece and Italy, current scenes of important ancient locations, findings

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[1] Exercise Exchange, 17 (Spring, 1973), 25-28.

in archaeology, and some maps had grown to such an extent that I was able to organize, for use at strategic times, a variety of slide showings related to what my students were reading and to what we were doing in class. Then, last summer, I wrote and taped for broadcast a series of eight roughly hour-long radio programs called Myths of the Greeks and Romans in Literature and Music. Each program, after the potpourri approach taken in the introductory one, focuses on some myth or personalities from mythology and employs narration on my part to weave together excerpts from various works involving the program's theme. For example, in the program entitled "Oedipus", I took a pastiche approach and used excerpts from works by Stravinsky, Cocteau, Sophocles, and Carl Orff. Students in my summer class listened to three of the programs for extra credit and helped me iron out some flaws. Students in my Fall Quarter class have been required to listen to the programs, those who weren't able to hear them at the weekly broadcast times listening to cassette tapes of the programs that were kept on reserve in the listening room of the library. Also, since our instructional television people have been cooperatively making video tapes of programs on television that I've asked them to tape, there are now four programs I have my basic myth students watch each quarter--including a ballet, opera, dramatic film, and documentary--all of them edited to fit into a fifty-minute class period. And finally, I still have my students read a novel, poems, or some plays that focus on specific myths--this quarter Andre Gide's "Oedipus" and "Theseus".

As should now be quite apparent, content focus on myths of the Greeks and Romans really broadens the course's potential rather

than restricts it. While it well might be possible to use other content focus to achieve desirable outcomes in a basic mythology course, consider this somewhat reiterative check list of questions before drawing any conclusions:

(1) Does the focal content of the course permit preparation that narrows down the range of the teacher's required knowledge or does it force the teacher into expertise he does not have?

(2) Does the focal content of the course permit truly "legitimate" handling by an English teacher and allow for course objectives that are justified in a course offered by the English Department?

(3) Does the focal content of the course actually promote a range of outcomes useful enough to students generally to make that content the best choice for the students' sake?

(4) Does the focal content of the course meet a growing demand for the meaningful involvement of media and variety in the presentation of course substance as well as a useful variety of experiences for the student?

Those questions summarize what is ostensibly germane to my proposals for legitimizing the department's bastard child. They can be argued and perhaps refuted in individual cases, but my intention has not been to establish hard and fast rules as much

as to put squarely before you the point that the basic mythology course in the English Department is a bastard child which only the individual teacher can legitimize and which can be legitimized in the ways I propose.

It is obvious that my solutions carry with them built-in questions. For instance, the question could be asked, what makes me assume teachers of English will be better prepared to focus on classical mythology than on something else? To that I would answer that it is a generalization I take to be true in most cases, most English teachers knowing more about that mythology than about any other or that about mythology in general. To the question that should arise about many students having had prior experience with the Greek and Roman myths, hence boredom at the prospect of more, I would answer that if the teacher encourages that as an advantage for those students who have the prior knowledge while letting those who haven't before encountered the myths in any significant way know he assumes no prior knowledge, all will work out well. However, if there's still another question concerning how do we know students who enter our basic mythology courses haven't been exposed before to the approaches I've just run through, well, I'd ask a question of my own. Who would be crazy enough to do all that work?

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